

REVIEW

Writing History in Swiss Design: A review of *Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft: 100 Jahre Schweizerischer Werkbund SWB*

Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft: 100 Jahre Schweizerischer Werkbund SWB, Thomas Gnägi, Bernd Nicolai and Jasmine Wohlwend Piai (eds.), Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 466 pages, 350 color and 188 b/w illustrations, 2013

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In Switzerland, where high production costs create a need to market quality design as both a label and an end in itself, industrial design has played a central role in the country's economic identity. The early protagonists of the Schweizerischer Werkbund (SWB, Swiss Association of Craftsmen) were conscious of this fact when negotiating the entanglements of industrial production and artistic creation. With its foundation in 1913, the SWB was to serve as a platform to discuss the potential and limitations of connections between the two fields. New forms of mass production had become a pressing issue for entrepreneurs, architects, designers, and artists alike. Amidst a cacophony of voices calling for radical change or mourning waning tradition, the SWB realized that joining forces would be to the benefit of everyone. Evoking names such as Max Bill or Lucius Burckhardt, as well as keywords such as Stuttgart Weissenhof or *Die gute Form*, the SWB mirrors the history of design and architecture in Switzerland. It has been pivotal in debates on how to shape modernity and how to foster 'good design' – from the smallest scale of product design to ideological struggles in regional planning.

The history of the organization follows the trajectory of changing goals, and there are several ways to write such a history. The reason for the organization's inception was the 'ennoblement of craftsmanship', but later the association turned more and more toward cultural-political questions and, from the 1970s onward, to the 'shape of the environment in its entirety'. The major publication *Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft: 100 Jahre Schweizerischer Werkbund SWB* undertakes an analysis of the SWB without personifying it as one coherent actor in 20th-century cultural history. While the SWB included between 120 and 900 members at a given time, this book nevertheless carves out 'the voice of the [Swiss] Werkbund', as is claimed in the book's preface (p. 12).



Edited by Thomas Gnägi, Bernd Nicolai, and Jasmine Wohlwend Piai on the occasion of SWB's anniversary, *Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft* provides a complex understanding of multiple contexts, actors, and cultural artifacts within the institution's history. A well-balanced collection of articles (all in German), the volume highlights SWB's *raison d'être* up to its relevance today. Focusing mostly on national debates, the essays do not lose sight of international preconditions and discursive interdependencies – for example, the Deutscher Werkbund (founded six years earlier) and its French-speaking Swiss counterpart L'Œuvre, or, more recently, the 'urban sprawl' in Switzerland.

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The publication retraces the association's importance, taking into account diverse historical, cultural, and societal transformations. Understanding itself as a 'movement' in 1913, revolving mostly around questions of product design, the SWB undergoes distinctive focal shifts. Originating within the reform movements around 1900, it constantly defines and redefines standpoints toward the avant-garde. This crystallized in its protagonists' controversies in the 1920s and 1930s, their participation in the historical milestone of the Stuttgart Weissenhof exhibition, and their disputes concerning 'formidable solutions' of postwar design.

A result of thorough archival research, *Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft* presents the first comprehensive chronology of SWB events and their protagonists. While Peter Erni's publication *Die gute Form* appeared thirty years ago and focused on SWB's stance on product design until the late 1960s (Erni 1983), other publications on the Swiss *Werkbund* originated either in-house or in one way or another have been linked to events organized under SWB's patronage. Christoph Bignens' encyclopedia – with the telling title *Geschmackselite Schweizerischer Werkbund* (2008) – includes an excellent yet brief introductory article on SWB as an 'association of the awarding and the awardees' (p. 8). Neither analysis, however, treats the past forty years of SWB history. The actual achievement of *Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft* is not only its focus on the entire one hundred years of SWB, but also its presentation of the association's history as both of conflicting individuals, parties, and discursive strategies as well as of converging personal constellations.

The role of industry within the first half of SWB's existence, for example, is succinctly articulated by Jasmine Wohlwend Piai. In accordance with the volume's claim to reconstruct the past 'from an inside view', using SWB archives, she spans a space between the 1919 amendment of SWB's constitution for the inclusion of industrial production and this assertive claim in 1967: 'The old

Werkbund has reached its goal: the industrial design of devices, the good design, prevails' (p. 227). Two contributions by Bernd Nicolai contextualize the organization up until the postwar period. Carefully considering historiographical aspects, the author illuminates actual and constructed relationships between SWB and the ideas of *Neues Bauen*. He shows how conflicting opinions between the traditionalist *Heimatschutz* and the SWB – all but a homogeneous 'ethical union' in face of another impending World War – lay at the core of a Swiss debate on 'modernity' (pp. 335–351). What it meant to actually influence the modernist discourse is shown by Thomas Gnägi. He assesses postwar SWB exhibitions and publications in their oscillation between ideals and the reality of everyday life, thus illustrating the association's shifting interests. It becomes evident how early goals of *Formerziehung* give way to a decidedly cultural-political focus in the last third of the 20th century.

Factual repetitions caused by the multitude of shorter contributions in the abundantly illustrated and thoughtfully designed book do not interfere with an insightful reading – on the contrary, they render palpable the obvious and less obvious contextual intersections. Well-placed cross references throughout the 460-page publication turn these junctions into visible markers; a chronicle and short portraits of the institution's leading figures complete the volume. With SWB's centennial, *Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft* is a comprehensive work on the association's contribution to shaping modernity and its cultural importance within post-modern debates in Switzerland.

References

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